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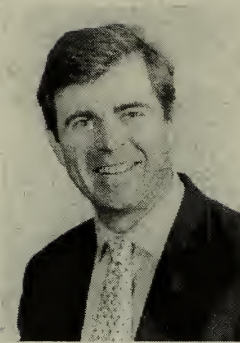
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he History of the

Arms and Great Seal
of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts



Published by
William Francis Galvin
Secretary of the Commonwealth



Dear Citizen,

This short publication highlights some of the history and symbolism of the Arms and Great Seal.

This Massachusetts tradition first began in 1629 under Charles 1.

Today, all official records must bear the Great Seal with an impression affixed in the name of the Commonwealth.

The evolution of the Seal is rich in Massachusetts culture, the images are traceable from century to century, and the value has survived the test of time. Indeed, it's authenticity and usefulness can be seen in the many documents that bear it's certification.

I hope this publication helps to provide you with some facts about the Arms and Great Seal.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "William Francis Galvin".

William Francis Galvin

Secretary of the Commonwealth

The History of the Seal of the Commonwealth

Seals, such as those that appear on documents certified by the Secretary of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, have a long history, mentioned even in the Bible. They were widely used many centuries ago because most people - even of high rank and wealth - did not read or write. To signify acceptance of a document they would make an impression of their coat-of-arms using a signet ring and a drop of wax.

As a result, there was a general reluctance to affix seals to documents unless absolute certainty of contents could be confirmed.

Eventually, documents of state and other important personal papers, such as deeds, would contain a seal that bore witness to authenticity.



In 1629, Charles I granted a charter authorizing the Massachusetts Bay Colony to use a seal. The impression of an Indian (shown at left) was adopted and used until the charter was annulled.



Governor Edmund Andros during his brief and arbitrary rule (1686-1689) used a seal with two sides.



Later, in the pre-revolutionary era, the royal coat-of-arms of England, combined with a suitable motto,

became the seal of the Province of Massachusetts (shown above). The royal governors affixed their personal seals to commissions issued to officers in the military service,

When the conflict between the province and England began in 1775, General Thomas Gage, the royal governor, had the custody of the Province seal. As his authority was no longer recognized by the province it became necessary to establish a new public seal.

The General Court passed an order on July 28, 1775, appointing a committee to consider "what is necessary to be done relative to a Colony Seal." The design adopted was that of the English-American in the next representation.

A motto, was also chosen - "Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem" - which through the years since the day of its adoption, has remained the motto of the Commonwealth. Freely translated this means, "By the sword we seek peace, but peace only under liberty." It was written about 1659, and is attributed to the famous English patriot, Algernon Sydney.

Soon after the first meeting on December 13, 1780 the state legislature under the Constitution accepted Nathan Cushing's design for a new seal for the Commonwealth. This action of the council was the only authority for the seal until 1885, when the legislature prescribed the seal in its present form.



"The arms of the commonwealth shall consist of a shield having a blue field or surface, with an Indian thereon, dressed in a shirt and moccasins, holding in his right hand a bow, and in his left hand an arrow, point downward, all of gold; and, in the upper corner of the field, above his right arm, a silver star with five points. The crest shall be a wreath of blue and

gold, whereon, in gold,
shall be a right arm,
bent at the elbow,
clothed and ruffled,
with the hand grasping
a broadsword.



The motto shall be "Ens
petit placidam sub libertate quietem."

The coat of arms as drawn and emblazoned
under the direction of the state secretary in the
year eighteen hundred an ninety-eight and
deposited in his office shall be the official repre-
sentation of the arms of the commonwealth of
Massachusetts, and all designs of said coat-of-
arms for official use shall conform strictly to said
representation.

The great seal of the commonwealth shall be
circular in form, bearing upon its face a repre-
sentation of the arms of the commonwealth
encircled with the inscription, "Sigillum
Reipublicae Massachusetts."

The colors of the arms shall not be an essential
part of said seal, and an impression from a seal
engraved according to said design, on any com-
mission, paper or document shall be valid with-
out such colors or the representation thereof by
heraldic lines or marks.


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In 1898, Edmund H. Garrett designed the official representation of the coat-of-arms for the state under the direction of the Secretary of the Commonwealth.

The Great Seal is in the custody of the Secretary of the Commonwealth, who is required by the Constitution to affix an impression of it to all commissions issued in the name of the commonwealth. The use of the arms of the Great Seal of the Commonwealth for advertising or commercial purposes is prohibited

by law. In addition to commissions, all records certified by the Secretary must bear the Great Seal.

The Great Seal in use today.





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